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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000750

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PRM/FO, NEA/ELA, CAIRO FOR DOETSCH, AMMAN FOR GREEN,
BAGHDAD FOR FOLEY

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TAGS: [PREF](#) [PREL](#) [IZ](#) [JO](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: SARG WILL ATTEND AMMAN REFUGEE WORKING GROUP;
SEEKS TO WORK DIRECTLY WITH IRAQ ON REFUGEE ASSISTANCE

REF: SECSTATE 098635

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Classified By: Charge D'affaires Michael H. Corbin for reason 1.4 b/d

11. (C) Summary: In a July 22 meeting, Charge delivered reftel demarche on the neighbor's working group on refugees to the Syrian DFM's office director, Hussam al-Din A'ala. A'ala noted SARG intentions to attend the meeting and to use the gathering to discuss modalities for delivering Iraqi government aid to refugees, but expressed SARG "puzzlement" over the poor coordination of the event on the part of both Iraq and Jordan. Countering demarche points, A'ala stated Syrian interest in working bilaterally with Iraq to determine projects, such as Syrian construction of hospitals and schools, that Iraq could fund. A'ala attributed the SARG's position to a desire to bypass UN bureaucracy, but agreed to consider using UN channels after the Charge pointed out that, unlike Iraq, the UN had mechanisms in place to speed delivery of aid. Although A'ala commented that the SARG viewed as "useful" the recent visit to Damascus of UN Deputy High Commissioner for Refugees Craig Johnstone, he expressed dissatisfaction with the current level of UN spending in support of Syrian efforts for Iraqi refugees and highlighted cumbersome UN contracting processes that the SARG believes slows relief efforts. A'ala acknowledged Syrian Foreign Ministry agreement to expedite, at Johnstone's request, processing visas for DHS officials to interview UNHCR referred refugees in August, but expressed confusion over the venue of activity, whether at IOM offices or the Embassy. As pressures on the MFA grow, increased international assistance will be important but security concerns may lead to new restrictions on Iraqi refugees this summer. End summary.

12. (C) On July 22, the Charge delivered reftel demarche on U.S. goals for the neighbor's working group on refugees to MFA DFM Faisal Miqdad's office director, Hussam al-Din A'ala. A'ala thanked the Charge for delivering the information, expressed appreciation for the U.S. focus on Iraq's need to shoulder its refugee responsibilities, and agreed with the overall U.S. goal of helping Iraq expedite refugee assistance. A'ala expressed "puzzlement" over the handling of the Amman meeting, noting conflicting signals and a lack of coordination from both Baghdad and Amman. He complained of multiple changes in scheduling, observing that Damascus

had only heard unofficially about the current July 26 date for the meeting and had not seen information on the level of representation expected. A'ala acknowledged that Syria would attend but was still deliberating on the level of participation, with the expectation that at least he or one of his deputies would be there.

13. (C) A'ala expressed SARG interest in using the Amman meeting to explore modalities for delivering Iraqi assistance to its citizens in Syria. He responded to demarche points urging Iraq to channel its pledges through UN appeals by stating a SARG preference for working directly with Iraq outside UN channels. The current Iraqi refugee situation was a "unique case," he noted, unlike other international donor situations, given the Iraqi government's direct responsibility to provide for its own citizens. A'ala cited Syrian interest in avoiding the "cycle of bureaucracy" at the UN that would attenuate delivery of assistance. In response to the Charge's query on how the SARG envisioned direct distribution of aid through bilateral channels, A'ala described reaching agreement with Baghdad on specific projects, such as schools and hospitals, that would be funded by Iraq and constructed by Syria in a "similar fashion to how UNHCR works, but saving the UNHCR bureaucracy." When the Charge observed that, unlike Iraq, the UN already had mechanisms in place to speed delivery of aid, A'ala noted that the SARG was open to discuss the issue and that he would raise the issue with his superiors in the MFA. A'ala particularly noted Charge's point that the USD 25 million already pledged by Iraq should go to the UN appeal.

14. (C) Separately, A'ala described the recent visit of UN Deputy High Commissioner for Refugees Craig Johnstone as useful for increasing UN understanding of the realities on the ground in Syria. He expressed the SARG hope to spur more effective international action in support of its refugee

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efforts. A'ala bemoaned prior delegation visits that produced few concrete results, asserting that UNHCR spending to support Syrian government efforts only totaled USD seven million thus far. Agreements currently in place between UNHCR and the Ministry of Health and another, second agreement with the Ministry of Education were burdened by cumbersome UN processes, he noted, such as demands that tenders for school construction be processed internationally, which slowed approvals.

15. (C) A'ala noted that Johnstone raised the issue of obtaining visas for DHS officials to process refugee cases, which the Charge clarified as routine visa applications in support of the Department of Homeland Security circuit-ride program. Though A'ala acknowledged that the Foreign Ministry had agreed to expedite the visas, he expressed some confusion about whether the refugee processing would be conducted at the offices of the International Office of Migration (IOM) or the Embassy, raising prior SARG objections to any processing at IOM of cases other than those referred by UNHCR. The Charge reiterated the routine nature of the circuit-ride process, citing past precedent of working through IOM offices, and stressed the potential security considerations involved in handling refugee cases through the Embassy. (Note: Separately, IOM told us they plan to notify the SARG a few days ahead of the circuit-ride, as is standard procedure, and also plan to conduct processing at the IOM building, if the team members get their visas. End note.)

16. Comment: The SARG is likely to open discussions on July 26 with its preference for direct assistance from Iraq. While we may be able to secure SARG support to channel the GOI's initial USD 25 million through UN appeals, it is likely the SARG will seek to use increasing contacts with the GOI to shape future refugee assistance from Iraq on its own terms. Given SARG complaints of limited UNHCR financial commitments thus far, they will no doubt welcome promises of expedited UN

assistance. The Foreign Ministry is under tremendous pressure from other ministries and the security services on the Iraqi refugee issue, with the former clamoring for follow-through on promised aid and the latter fretting over the lack of control over the refugees. Pressure from the security services is likely to rise, especially in the event of a terrorist incident or a spike in crime. If so, we predict the SARG will try once again to impose stricter controls on Iraqi refugees. We understand the government is currently conducting a very quiet assessment of the benefits to the economy of Iraqi capital inflows versus the costs of subsidies and the strain on public services. Given Syrian sensitivity to domestic stability, security arguments may well trump economic considerations, even if it makes economic sense to continue allowing refugee entry.

CORBIN